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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MONROVIA 000887

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AF/W FOR JBUELOW, PDAVIS, AOKEDIJI INR/AA FOR BGRAVES, DRL

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: NEW UNION LEADERSHIP AT FIRESTONE

REF: A. MONROVIA 0518

1B. MONROVIA 0253

1.(U) SUMMARY: Members of the Firestone Agricultural Workers Union of Liberia (FAWUL) elected new leadership on July 7 after months of infighting and two strikes. FAWUL is the largest union of workers at the Firestone Plantations Company. The elections were peaceful and turnout was high. Austin Natee of the Aggrieved Workers Union was declared the winner. Foreign and local observers declared the election fair but the four losing candidates have protested the results. The date of appointment has yet to be set by the Ministry of Labor. The Labor Court invalidated the election on July 20 until "certain issues" could be resolved. END SUMMARY.

Background

2.(U) The FAWUL has been in dispute since December of 2006 when Labor Minister Samuel Woods suspended the leadership for allegedly misappropriating funds. An interim leadership was established by the Minister to run the organization until the investigation could be completed. The suspended leadership took this decision to the Supreme Court and got a writ of prohibition against the interim leadership. The parent Union of the FAWUL, the General Agricultural and Allied Worker Union of Liberia (GAAWUL), intervened and the case was removed from the court in April and negotiations began between the FAWUL, the GAAWUL and the Minister of Labor for settlement. (FYI: The Minister of Labor, Samuel Kofi Woods, previously was the head of local labor NGO, the Foundation for International Dignity (FIND). Additionally his sister is suing Firestone, in a US court, for slave labor practices in Liberia. END FYI) A faction of the FAWUL called the Aggrieved Workers Union split to demand that the suspended leadership and interim leadership both be ineligible to lead the Firestone workers. On April 9 there were dueling protests in front of the Ministry of Labor. The Aggrieved Workers Union is backed by the Congress of National Trade Unions of Liberia (CONATUL) while the GAAWUL continues its support of the suspended FAWUL leadership. Adding to the confusion, CONATUL receives help from the United Steel Workers (USW) in America which represents Firestone workers in the Ohio plant. On April 24, a "go slow" action by Firestone workers halted operations at the plantation for a day and UNMIL and the LNP had to be called in to restore order. An April 28 meeting in Monrovia among union factions, legislators from the House of Representatives and Firestone management decided to hold new elections on July 7.

Election

3.(U) The Ministry of Labor appointed an elections commission, led by Sister Mary Brown of the Catholic Church, to oversee the election. 32 candidates ran for 7 positions. There were 3,000 votes cast and Austin Natee won the presidency with 1,367 votes (45% of the vote). The four defeated presidential candidates have filed an official complaint against the election, alleging that Austin Natee violated the elections guidelines by engaging in pre-campaigning activities. They also claimed that the disqualification of one of the candidates by the Election Commission was not justifiable.

4.(U) The United Steel Workers (USW) sent an elections observation team from the US and Nigeria to observe. The group, along with the general secretary of the CONATUL met with Pol Off and Econ Counselor at the embassy on July 10. They all confirmed that the election was free and fair and that they hoped that the Firestone management would now work with the newly elected leadership in addressing worker issues in pay and educational opportunities for family members.

¶6. On July 20 the Labor Court in Monrovia nullified the election. This was in response to an injunction filed by the GAAWUL asserting that the Minister went ahead with the election without consulting Liberian law. Additionally the Minister of Labor, Sister Brown and the Agricultural Minister were fined in the decision.

5.(SBU) COMMENT: The election of Austin Natee will not stop the infighting that has plagued the FAWUL. Natee is seen as a favorite of the Minister of Labor and as such, the supporters of the suspended former leaders of the FAWUL are expected to undermine his leadership. The GAAWUL is also

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suspicious of the connection between Natee and the Ministry of Labor. The Firestone management is wary of the new leadership because they worked with Minister Woods when he was Director of FIND to help prepare the case of alleged slave labor against Firestone in the US. Another potentially disturbing issue is that the USW observers seemed anxious that the workers of the Firestone plantation receive wages far above the prevailing rates in Liberia. Such wages, despite the current high world price for rubber, could be ruinous to an industry that needs to heavily reinvest after the destruction wrought during 14 years of conflict if it wants to remain viable. END COMMENT.

Booth